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Error correction in EFL speaking classrooms

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Abstract

An effort is made in this study to research EFL teachers' attitudes referring to error correction. Hence, the purpose of this article is to explore Rustaveli University teachers' suppositions and preferences for error-correction strategies. Our studies investigating the effects of error correction feedback have suggested that if correction technique is not chosen in a proper way it can unintentionally upset students' confidence in fluency. Furthermore, the correction method cannot be ideal and unique for all kinds of learners since what can seem appropriate for one student can be discouraging and demotivating for another.

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1. Introduction

Being able to speak the target language implies that the learner has the ability to function in another language. To master discourse competence learners are encouraged to practice a wide range of speaking activities such as: role-plays, debates, information gaps, acting from a script, discussions, problem-solving activities, decision making activities, quizzes, gapped dialogues, questionnaires, story-telling and others. But how and when to respond to students' errors in speaking activities is a controversial topic in methodology. Although there is more tolerant attitude towards students' errors in modern methodology, this does not mean that student errors are welcome.

When a number of EFL teachers at Batumi Rustaveli University, Georgia were asked for their opinions if they considered error making process to be the result of ineffective and unsuccessful learning they

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suggested that student errors were the evidence that learning was taking place. Accordingly, EFL teachers advocated the idea of positive feedback of error making process.

Still, instant and intrusive correction can often be inappropriate since it can have harmful and negative effects on students' will to activate L2. It can interfere with students attempt to talk freely and directly that may result in the learner inhibition. It is obvious that all human beings are to some extent inhibited, but those who are shy and have low self-esteem can fail to overcome their speaking problems. They simply may lose the will to experiment with the language. Inadequate and undue correction destroys the natural flow of speaking practice and it can be misleading or debilitating just at the very moment when students try to activate a foreign language.

Therefore, an effort was made in this study to make up a questionnaire referring to error correction attitudes to be defined by teachers. It included two parts each of them with specific aims and objectives: 1. To find out the reasons why our students make mistakes or errors 2. To investigate teachers' methods and ways how to correct errors and to explore their preferences which technique to use while correcting.

The participants of the study were 30 EFL teachers at Batumi Rustaveli State University in Georgia. Batumi University offers an intensive English course providing qualification in both receptive skills (reading and listening) and productive skills (writing, speaking). Accordingly, EFL teachers' responses were based on experience they had at Rustaveli state university.

EFL teachers' responses made it evident that there are several factors involved in making errors. Based on the survey of possible reasons why our students make errors there is an attempt in the article to rate them according to their intensity.

As revealed by teachers' responses:

1. The first and the most frequent factor of error making problem is caused by Interference from L1. This is when Georgian students transfer features of their native language L1 to the target language L2. This provokes errors mainly in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Georgian students tend to make errors in subject-verb agreement, word order in the sentence, the use of conditionals and the use of preposition. for example, Georgian students often say: "Exams begin from Monday" instead of "exams start on Monday". "He came with the bus" instead of "He came by bus". "He died from cancer" instead of "He died of cancer", "My notebook is different than yours" instead of "Different from"

2. The second factor influencing error occurrence is complexity of the target language. This is when mislearning takes place and students get distracted by too many variables – this is when due to the complex structure of the language students learn new rules and forms only partly. Georgian students tend to make errors in the use of polysemantic words, omonyms, phrasal verbs, misuse of infinitive, the use of article, etc. E.g. "I object to be treated like this" instead of "Object to being treated", "I often think to change the job instead of "I think of changing the job", "we can't avoid to make the mistakes" instead of "avoid making", "do you mind to open the door" instead "mind opening", "he has no difficulty to do this task" instead of "has difficulty in doing", etc. Confusing words such as "make/do", "rise/raise", "lie/lay", "say/tell" "sit/seat" and others also cause a problem for students.

3. The next factor is overgeneralization or developmental error – this is when students learn a grammar rule but then they still apply it incorrectly because they try to apply a recently learnt grammar rule to all forms. E.g. Georgian students misuse comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs. E.g. "This book is more good than that one" instead of "better than", "The more students will confirm this" instead of "most students" or "more cleverer than" instead "cleverer than". Students also use "one time" or "two times" instead of "once" or "twice".

4. Fossilization comes the fourth in rating –This is when faulty forms become so rigid, fixed and outmoded in students' minds that learners seem to be unable and unwilling to correct them. They keep repeating the same mistakes and find it impossible to learn the correct version. E.g. "She is one of the best girl in my class" instead of "one of the best girls". Herewith, students frequently use a double negative.

E.g. “He is not afraid of nobody” instead of “not afraid of anybody” or “today morning” instead of “this morning”

5. The lack of speaking practice or communicative competence (trying to explain something but inability to do). Based on Teachers’ comments it is clear-cut that students can produce sentences accurately at the lesson but can not use them appropriately outside the classroom. At this stage it is recommended to use as much authentic material as possible (newspapers, magazines, videos, TV or radio programmes) and enable students to interact with one another and give practice in using the language for real-life communication.

6. Fatigue or carelessness (big test in previous class, too many classes, hunger, illness...)

7. Feeling of inferiority and low self-esteem – the fear of being ridiculed by your peers or teachers if something goes wrong in your speech

8. Inhibition – the lack of confidence in your own abilities, the fear of doing something badly, the fear of making mistakes. Shy students are commonly inhibited. They avoid speaking and prefer to sit in the shadows.

9. The lack of empathy between teachers and learners. This is when understanding between a teacher and a student fails. A student who is not empathised by a teacher at the moment of interaction tends to make errors in speaking.

As shown in teachers’ responses there are a number of reasons why our students make mistakes. Several research studies investigating error correction problem suggest some decisions how to deal with oral errors.

1. The first thing to be done is to identify the kind of mistake. i.e. What kind of error has been made? (is it grammatical, vocabulary choice, pronunciation)

2. Whether to deal with it? At the next stage teacher’s task is to make a decision to deal with this error or not. There is some evidence that there is no point in trying to correct any and all errors that occur in speaking classrooms. It depends on the objective of the speaking activity – what particular language items should be focused on. Is the activity fluency oriented or accuracy oriented? “feedback on fluency takes the form of performance evaluation including the following criteria:

- a) Flow of speaking – useful expressions, a good range of vocabulary
- b) Effort of speaking – ability to produce proficient language
- c) Speed of speaking - number of hesitation and pauses

Teachers have to decide which errors they are going to work on and ignore others for the time being. E.g. when focusing on structural errors teachers should not get sidetracked by pronunciation problems. If teachers start correcting all kinds of errors, they will find that a large part of the lesson was spent on working with “secondary” errors.

3. Another serious decision a teacher has to make is “When to deal with it?” i.e. the timing of feedback. Should errors be responded immediately i.e. on the spot correction or at the end of communicative activity? i.e. delayed or postponed feedback that can be dealt with the following day when the whole class maybe devoted to the feedback session. The most widely accepted attitude towards error correction in the fluency oriented activities is delayed or postponed feedback. Whereas in accuracy oriented activities immediate feedback or on the spot correction is to be done.

4. Who will deal with it? In regard with feedback providers recent theory on teaching methodology supports the position that there can be three options:

A. Self-correction considered to be the best form of correction. Teachers should encourage students to notice their own errors and to make attempts to correct themselves.

B. Peer correction – encourages cooperation providing a basis for a group work or a pair work.

C. Teacher correction.

5. How to deal with it? Teachers have to make a decision about which verbal and nonverbal techniques to use for error correction.

After background information about the reasons of error making was collected from the teachers, they were asked to point out techniques and strategies they use while correcting errors and stating their preferences for them.

The survey made it obvious that the most widely-spread methods of error correcting in speaking classrooms is:

1. ECHOING – teachers echo the word or the phrase or the whole sentence with questioning intonation and stress to give students the hint where exactly the mistake was made.

2. REPETITION UP TO THE ERROR – a teacher repeats the sentence up to the error and waits for students to correct it

3. HINTING / PROMPTING – showing where an error is and giving a clue how to correct it, a teacher gives some hints how to proceed

4. MAKING A NOTE OF COMMON ERRORS- a teacher makes notes of typical errors and deals with them in a remedial or feedback session.

5. NONVERBAL WAY (as soon as an error occurs a teacher uses facial expression to draw students' attention. This is when teachers have a worried look or hand outstretched to "hold" until the error is corrected, Nonverbal method involves a raised eyebrow, a finger correction, shaking head as well.

6. TELLING THEM (there is an error in the sentence. Who can correct it?)

7. REFORMULATION – a teacher reformulates incorrect version, provides a correct answer, repeats it and makes an emphasis on it

8. RECORDING ON TAPE - a teacher records students' speech on tape and uses a peer correction method after students have listened to themselves. This is the method which is rarely used by EFL teachers at Rustaveli State University though it is an alternative way to variety of error correction methods.

Regarding teachers' preferences of error correction strategies the items 1, 2 and 3 were highly evaluated as the perfect and effective strategies to be applied while correcting errors. As it is revealed they are teachers' favorable ones. As for the items 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 they received less positive evaluation from teachers though none of these items were evaluated as negative and absolutely ineffective method in modern methodology.

The purpose of this article was to explore Rustaveli University teachers' suppositions and preferences for error-correction. The survey made it obvious that students' need for error correction is of essential significance, but there are no rules about correcting strategies that could be ideal and universal for all teachers. Therefore, perhaps the best way of correcting speaking activities appropriately and productively is to explore students' feelings and beliefs about it – how and when they would like to be corrected. Thus, it is recommended that teachers should become aware of both their and their students' beliefs about error correction.

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